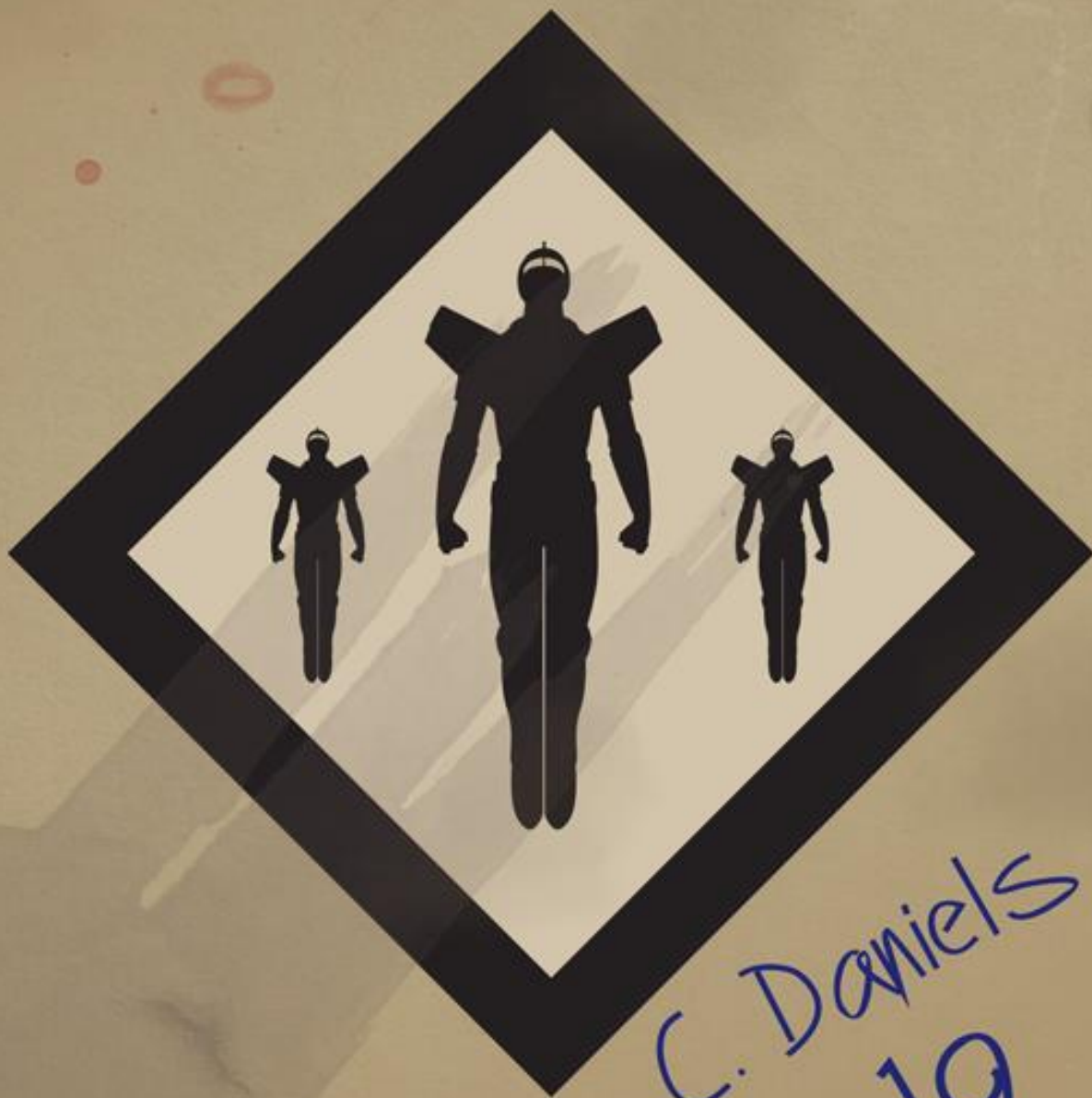


THE SKYRACOS DICTA



*C. Daniels
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AIRWING TRAINING MANUAL # 56-109-03

THE SKYRACOS DICTA

Created by John Picha

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SKYRACOS

History of the Dicta

Ozgood Price was known to the people of Centrus as the first Skyraco. He was part scientist, part diplomat, part superhero and all-Centrian legend. He was the inventor of the iconic armored flight suit and went on many adventures while encased in it.

As he explored alien worlds he discovered things about himself and the responsibility his Skyraco role carried. Overtime he forged a personal sense of duty.

He built the first armored flying suit then assembled and led the first Skyraco team, the Rough Flyers. This group would eventually grow into the Skyraco Corps. As their ranks swelled beyond the influence of his leadership and oversight, Ozgood wasn't able to screen all newcomers. Overtime he began to encounter unsavory personality types, and abuses of power that needed to be weeded out. The newly evolving breed of wingmen were playing the Skyraco role differently than Ozgood and he didn't approve.

So he set out to devise a code of sorts, from the revelations, ideals and discoveries he'd made during his early adventures. He examined his life as

a Skyraco and wanted to record the purity of his intent. He asked himself; How did I make it? What did I do? What was important to me?

His subsequent answers were preserved to offered advice and guidance to future students long after his death. This series of personal notes from Ozgood Price would become **The Skyraco Dicta...**

.Introduction.

As our forces become spread more thinly, you will have direct contact with peoples (beings, creatures) very different from (you) our own.

We require you to be self-reliant and strong (vigilant) when representing our planet. You are in a unique position of power, vested with the authority to make life and death decisions. You are an ambassador of our homeworld and must respect that responsibility.

.01.

Maintain Self Control

We have the tendency to make poor (rash) decisions when we let our emotions, pride or weakness lead us. Never willingly surrender your control to another force, idea, (ideology, theology) substance or being.

.02.

Know Yourself

You must be honest to know your capabilities, recognize your limits, exploit (rely on) your strengths. You are a being of immeasurable power. You exist simultaneously in an abstract universe and a physical community. Rely on your experience (and curiosity) to guide you through both.

.03.

Know Your Team

Everyone has unique abilities and limits. You must know your team to trust them. This will allow you each to focus on your best strength and increasing the units might. You are extensions of one another. Acknowledge any weakness in the team framework and compensate for it with strengths.

.04.

Strong Mind Strong Body

The strength of your physical and mental forms must be maintained. Your mind and body are interlocked. Exercise both. This will keep you (at peak performance) balanced. When you stop nurturing either, tasks increase in difficulty and you reduce your power as well as the groups (teams). Free yourself of the interference that comes from weakness. Enjoy the inherent confidence strength offers as well as practical benefits. Simply commit yourself. A stronger you makes a stronger team.

.05.

Excel Through Simulation and Experience

With more information, you make better decisions. Collect it through practical experience. It's best to experiment in a controlled environment where you're more likely to take risks and error won't be costly. Play, pretend, simulate reenact, imagine and explore. Through this activity you will discover your true limits. Learn from your mistakes.

.06.

Awareness - Forward and Back

See the worlds around you in parameters influence, which you can affect. These are both temporal and physical (corporeal) areas (arenas). You are less likely to be surprised or vulnerable (or draw undue attention) (create undue tension) if you are aware. Have a discreet presence until you want to effect change. Be aware of the reach of your potential actions.

.07.

Listen With a Clear Mind

Many forces will attempt to influence you for their benefit or agenda. Make yourself less susceptible to unwelcome propaganda. Don't accept urgent messages at face value. Challenge what's presented. Don't rely on any one source for your information. Find corroborating sources (evidence, validation) or rely on own experience. Trust your judgment and instinct.

.08.

Look for Connections

Acquire all the information you can get. Study the issues and environments, observe behavior and scrutinize detail. Eliminate what doesn't apply, to get to the truth more rapidly. Be a participant, do experimentation. Piece together and examine events as they unfold, look for reoccurring patterns. You will make better decisions with better (complete / robust / comprehensive) information.

.09.

In the Search of the Truth

The truth is illusive, but has a way of revealing itself over time. You need only be patient and resist prejudice.

Ask questions, collect facts, and scrutinize physical and contextual evidence. Look for threads of related information and clues in behavior. As you develop a more complete picture don't be afraid to draw conclusions, if necessary, you can modify them as new information arises. A lie comes out of fear of consequences (or repercussion).

Find the truth in situations then decide how to use it.

Try to speak the truth but beware of its effect.

.10.

Look for Resolutions

A big problem is comprised of small pieces. Attack those first. Break down the parts and whole will crumble. Don't be afraid to challenge your ideas, but keep moving forward. Don't get trapped or stall yourself. Avoid getting tangled in rhetoric that concludes with inaction. There are always solutions. (Usually comprised [composed] of small parts)

.11.

Own Your Words (Know What You Think)

Be aware of the power of your words and actions. Know what you think, understand your beliefs. Don't say or do things you don't mean or understand. You are in a position of influence, take responsibility seriously and hold yourself accountable for everything you say or do.

.12.

Stacking the Odds in Your Favor

The more resources you can utilize, the better your chances for continual success. You'll find benefits from complete information, overlapping disciplines, tools, resources and in numbers. Try to anticipate situations, but be flexible. As x-factors arise, incorporate or combat them quickly. Try to turn all elements to your advantage. Be prepared for anything and think quick.

.13.

Be Resourceful

Focusing on what you don't have is unproductive. In matters of survival, it's better to assess what resources are available to you. Look around you and make do. Be creative.

Tools, shelters, materials, weapons and food can be located in the most remote or unlikely environments. Connecting ideas with the elements in an environment can extend your power (increase your strength.)

.14.

Respect Life

The one commonality we all share is life. We must respect it (in all forms). It should not be taken lightly.

.15.

Identify Real Danger

Fear will paralyze you. It will leave you vulnerable. All fear stems from the unknown is a common misconception. We fear potential damage (pain) inflicted by things lurking in the unknown.

Assess the situation and proceed with caution. If a true threat exists, it will reveal itself, respond accordingly. If it can't kill you, it's not a real threat. If it can't destroy your body, it's merely an irritant, inconvenience or obstacle. All can be dealt with.

.16.

Avoid Hypocrisy

You must hold yourself accountable to the same standard you apply to others.

.Summary.

As you explore new worlds, cultures and ideas, you will grow. Your perceptions may alter. Do not fear it. The code is not meant as a barrier to restrict individual (your) evolution; instead it is a guide meant to extend your life.

You are being of constant change, a citizen of the cosmos, and a part of our homeworld, Centrus. You are relevant. Make your relevance count.

- Ozgood

John Picha was born on St. Patrick's Day 1968 in Joliet, Illinois. He was raised in Frankfort, a suburb of Chicago, but his mind always seemed to be elsewhere. The little Midwesterner was captivated by comic books, cartoons, animation, mythology and all things imagined. He made the world around him more exciting by pretending. A bicycle was a spacecraft, a bush became a dinosaur, and, of course, there was always a bath towel hidden away for a quick change into a super hero.

John is also the inventor of Thumbtraps for iPad and tablet gaming.

www.thumbtraps.com

If you'd like to learn more about John or to see his other work, you can visit him on the web.

www.takejohn.com

www.youtube.com/johnpicha

www.pandoradriver.com

If you'd like to read more adventures of the Skyracos, simply do a search for them in your favorite eBookstore or visit them on the web.

www.skyracos.com

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Picha". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal line extending from the left and a long horizontal line extending from the right.

(PREVIEW)

SKYRACOS: THE MINING MESS

WHAT ARE SKYRACOS?

Have you ever dreamt of visiting alien worlds? Have you ever wished you could zip through space via jet pack? What if you could defy gravity and explore unknown realms freely? Imagine being a space adventurer, paid to meet and greet alien cultures, while representing and protecting all of humanid-kind. You'd live to tell tales of glory. You'd be the stuff of legends. Sounds like a dream job, right? Well, no job is perfect, and there is a high price to be paid for this fantasy. That's reality for a Skyraco.

The Skyracos are winged warriors that conduct inter-planetary missions throughout the Zoland system. They receive directives from the governing council on their home-world Centrus. The Council members serve differing agendas, all with a stake in what assignments the Skyracos undertake. Many reap rewards while Skyracos absorb the risk.

Skyracos operate on the frontier of the known, on worlds remote and unimagined. They must deal with logistical problems derived from vastly stretched supply and communication lines. Often their only humanid contact is with the other members of their own small teams. They execute orders from far away Centrus while fending and foraging for themselves. Operating outside the reach of the Council, they are isolated and afforded great powers of authority. They are forced to interpret crises and dispense justice on their terms.

Different entities see Skyracos through the prism of their own interests. To the Council of Centrus they are the upholders of property laws. To businessmen they are insurance policies protecting investments. To the citizenry of Centrus they are combatants fighting some distant battle. Believers in Zod see them as missionaries, claiming dominion over alien animals and vanquishing evil. Their allies view them with a wary eye. To enemies they are the armored boot on their throat. To space settlers they are protectors. To kids they are idols, superheroes always on the side of good. And for young adults, joining their ranks may be the only means of survival. A Downward Economic Spiral has struck Centrus and times are tough. The Skyracos promise good pay and offer the only available jobs. Many enlist.

Skyracos are defined by outside perspectives, but the only way to understand them is to become one. Then the truth becomes clear. Skyracos are just average people doing a job they sometimes hate.

Over time new recruits fade into a washed out reality, governed by the basest of human character. Survival replaces purpose. Necessity replaces righteousness. Instinct replaces reason as strangers replace friends killed in battle. They are purveyors of death in perpetual mourning for lost comrades and lost innocence, all while deeds are cloaked by mythology. They bleed for others' greed, fighting to remain more civilized than their leaders. Eventually every Skyraco comes to realize another stark truth... all heroes don't make it home.

Welcome to their uncomfortable world.

PART 01

Incite

The entrance to the alien hideout was a long black slit that looked like a crooked scowl. It was carved into a cliff wall, high above the ground. The stone was too sheer for a man to climb, but the aliens of this realm could scurry up and down it like bugs.

The interior of the cave was jagged and dark like a scene from a nightmare. This was the lair of deadly things, of evil things, who held a beautiful young woman captive. She was gagged and bound to a chair surrounded by stalactites and stalagmites which form a sinister cell. The green skinned monsters circle the columns guarding their lovely prisoner with bizarre ray weapons coiled in moist, quivering tentacles. They spoke to one another in a gurgled language that sounded like laughter.

The woman feared there was no hope for escape and began to cry.

Unbeknownst to her and the green skinned fiends that held her, a single brave young hero, Chip Daniels, was sneaking into the corner of the dark maw. The cliff wall may have been unscalable by an ordinary man, but Chip was no ordinary man. He was a Skyraco, and all Skyracos were issued zero-g flight-packs.

The large number 19 painted on the back of his armor faded into the shadows as he crept down a winding tunnel into the alien cavern. Nineteen was his identification number as well as his age.

He reached a locked door and spied the prisoner through a small window in the alien dungeon. He quickly assessed the situation and acted. The door burst into splinters as he crashed through. He fought his way through the alien hoard to the damsel in distress. Electric ray beams bounced off

his armored chest as he shielded the helpless beauty.

Chip quickly vanquished the vile villains, then untied the maiden. He pulled off his helmet to reveal the dashing smile of this young man of Centrus. The helpless maiden fell lovingly into his arms.

“Oh, Chip...” She kissed him deeply as he heard romantic music swell in his imagination.

Chip was daydreaming, again.

In actuality those events only took place in his mind. Visions of glory were what sustained Chip as he struggles to stay attuned to the mundane responsibilities assigned to him in reality. He really is a Skyraco, and he is encased in his winged armor hovering high above an alien world. But he is using his astonishing equipment to polish a red light at the tip of a radio relay tower that stood in the middle of nowhere. From his vantage point he could view all 360 degrees of the dark orange horizon of the planet Claous. There is nothing but barren clay plains.

He is beginning to realize how much downtime there is when you were a Skyraco. Not every aspect of the job was adventure, but those are the moments he longs for. Others had called Claous, “The most boring place in the entire Zoland System.”

He is beginning to think it is true.

“Great use of a flight-pack,” thought Chip.

He is covered from head to toe in a metal flight-suit. Though the brass and bronze armor is bulky, the design is functional. It has a streamlined grace

with strategically placed rivets and bolts.

The helmet is divided in half by a single round fin that starts below the nose and ends at the base of the cranium. In front it split a horizontal viewing port into two rectangle lenses that protect the pilots eyes sealed inside.

The wearers are built into their flight-suits by specialized mechanics. Their flesh shares cramped armor space with a complex system of wires, switches and gears. The assembly process is so meticulous it's conducted like a ritual before each extended mission. Chip has been wearing his flight-suit for nearly three weeks. The fit is uncomfortable and sticky, and most of the time he got pressure sores, but like all Skyracos he got used to it after a while. To most it is a small price to pay to be able to fly.

Although Chip is stuck doing busy work, he does a thorough job. He mutters to himself as he cleans. "I got into this racket for action, to save the day, and get the glory. I'm supposed to be a hero, not the janitor."

Suddenly, Chip's maintenance duties are interrupted by a transmission received over his helmet radio. Static takes form and becomes the voice of his commander.

"Everyone get down here, now!" orders the man everyone called the Chief.

Chip rockets away from his task at full speed.

Skyraco flight-packs house a zed-gravity-coil that makes the wearer weightless. Then a compact mono-jet provides propulsion. The flight-suit pilot can steer by using arms as wings, legs as flaps and hands as ailerons

against the wind force as they rush through the air. Their maneuvering looks similar to how men move while swimming underwater, but much faster.

All six members of Chip's Skyraco team, Unit 9901, fly from various locations to a predefined rendezvous point. Chip careens over the horizon to an isolated airstrip, and lands. As his team gathers, the Chief speaks.

"There was an accident at a nearby Eternuim mining colony. Our unit is the closest and can enact a rapid rescue if necessary."

Chip asks, "Was anyone killed?"

The Chief replies, "We don't know yet. Let's go find out."

At the small airstrip outpost a Light Penetration Bomber is being prepped for the mission when Chip and his crew arrive.

The LPB-29 stands on hydraulic landing gear. The craft is painted two colors of orange, counter shaded for camouflage on this alien world. The body is a long cylinder rounded on both ends. It is 45 feet from tip to tail. At the front, a cockpit sits behind a clear nose cone with a web of metal that blends into a mosaic of square windows. A long, stout dorsal wing runs the length of the fuselage in a line that is interrupted by a powerful jetport in the rear. The main engine is flanked by two, secondary engine nacelles. One either side of the body thick, streamlined wings sweep to the rear. Near the port side front, nose-art features a cartoon skyscraper blasting out of a red circle like a rocket. The title of the illustration reads, "The High-rise."

To Chip and Skyraco Unit 9901, this LPB-29 is their home away from

home.

Though the LPBs were designed to be bombers, necessity has expanded their role over time. They are limited to inter-atmospheric flight, but they have multiple duties within that realm. They are used as attack, transport, recon and escape vehicles.

Off-world resources have been stretched thin. Some teams may have access to bases, but many times they don't. Typically LPBs are staffed with a modest Skyraco crew and sent into the unknown. Unless they are collected into a massive fleet, they are on their own. Inevitably LPB units become independently operating teams. They turn into self-contained units forced to live off alien lands or any resources they can scrounge.

The engines of the bomber roar angrily to life. Within moments team 9901 is loaded and in the air. The alien sky over Claous is orange with a few cirrostratus clouds of a lighter shade. To Chip the view seems like perpetual sunset. As the bomber cruises, the Skyracos take turns peeking through the few windows at the plethora of moons that hang in the sky.

Chip smiles in anticipation of the adventure. "Now, this is more like it."

As they progress, the landscape begins to look wrinkled, eventually twisting into strange rock formations. Further in the distance the LPB pilot spots the mining colony. The crew gathers at the cockpit doorway to see the massive smoke plumes rising from burning mine buildings. There are several fires. The colony's settlement is downwind and engulfed in black clouds.

In clear conditions, from above, colonies from Centrus look like a giant X with a big black dot in the center. The big dot is a dark metal disk four

stories tall. This flat drum was a massive cargo container delivered from Centrus via rocket. Upon arrival it was stuffed with equipment and supplies to construct a colony. Once depleted, it became a central part of the colony's architecture. This structural practicality earned these humanid habitats the popular moniker, "Tin Can Towns."

Four ten story buildings radiate out from the disk. They are orange and made of bricks processed out of local materials. So is the large, gated wall that encircled the colony marking its perimeter. It is supposed to keep the population of 1,410 colonists safe from alien threats.

Destiny City Population: 1,410

The bomber makes a sharp decent into a vertical landing outside the colony wall. The Skyraco crew quickly meets up with ground security forces. Behind the massive colony gate, crowd members scream and yell. Some cry to get out.

The puzzled Chief strides over to a sentry. "We've been sent here to support you guys. What can we do?"

The nervous security guard removes his black helmet and respirator to wipe the sweat from his brow and says, "The colonists are rioting and they need to be stopped. We don't want to hurt anybody. We just want to keep these people contained and calm, while the fire fighters do their jobs."

"What happened here?" asked the Chief.

"Well, there was an...."

The guard's words are cut off by an approaching representative of the Arkon Mining Company. His name is Mr. Tultee. He has a thick, dark brow and is well dressed in a crisp, clean, dark long-coat suit, and dusty high-boots.

"I'll handle it from here, thank you," corrected Mr. Tultee as he leads the Chief away from the group by the arm. He introduced himself as the Director of Operations then got right to his main concern. "There is a pack of agitators inciting trouble in the colony. They will sabotage our entire operation."

Pointing to the gated crowd the Chief asks. "They set these fires?"

"They most certainly did. Can you believe that? They are destroying their own homes."

The rest of Skyraco Unit 9901 watch and listen as the two men speak. While awaiting orders from the Chief, Chip scans the colony crowd at the barred gate. Something doesn't seem right about the situation. The rioters look and sound more scared than angry.

Mr. Tultee continues, "...property damage, not to mention lost revenue, could creep into millions of credics if we don't put an end to their madness. We need them back under control."

Then, like an afterthought, he adds, "Oh, and the diggers discovered something in the mine. Ever since, they've been crazy like this. They might have released a germ or something. We're not sure yet. It's hard for us to try and solve a serious problem in the middle of all this nonsense. For now, we need your team to keep the colonists in line. Stop them from wrecking anything else."

The Chief concludes the briefing with a hardy handshake and says proudly, “We are here to help.”

Mr. Tultee shakes enthusiastically and smiles in relief. “Glad to hear it. Welcome to Destiny City.”

It's such a big name for such a small outpost.

Mr. Tultee starts walking to a flying fan-cart in the background.

He stops again remembering one more thing to add. “Oh, and there will be a meeting in the saucer-blimp in twenty minutes. You should attend.”

The Chief accepts what the mining rep says with a nod and then issues orders to his Skyraco team. “Go hermetic, so you don’t breathe in any smoke or toxins that might be in the air. I can’t imagine you will be in any physical danger in your armor. See if you can keep the colonists from hurting themselves or each other. You’d better split up to cover more space. Got it?”

The armored Skyraco wingmen announce in unison, “Got it!”

They seal their helmets, making them airtight. Their wings pop open. Their flight-packs fire and the team blasts off in a cascade. They fly over the colony wall and above the grounds. The smoke continues drifting from the burning mining buildings in the distance.

Chip flies into the smoke then lands inside the wall. He fumbles through the thick cloud. He can't get his bearings. Panicked people are running wildly around him. He is knocked about by a few as he shuffles.

Frustrated, he grabs one of the colonists. He is shocked to see a humanoid face distorted by a horrible pox. Reflexively he releases him. The colonist is stunned for a moment then smiles in relief.

Then the deformed man yells out to the rest of the colonists. “Help is here! There are S kyracos here!”

A dampening wave rolls through the smoke hidden crowd. The yelling and screaming fades into silence. Other infected people emerge from the smoke and peacefully collect around Chip.

Chip asks the man, “What happened?”

Before the pox victim could answer, security guards wielding clubs crash through the assembly. They are sealed in makeshift protective gear with respirators. They’ve come to round up the key agitators. Their bombastic arrival sends the colonists into another frenzy.

Chip works to try to separate the people from a clash with security. He stops them from fighting by standing between the opposing sides. He tries reasoning with anyone who will listen. “We’re not here to crack skulls. We are here to help. We just need to know what happened.”

The crowd clamors around him. They all talk at once. He can’t understand any of them.

Chip’s tells everyone, “Hold on. Hold on!”

The words go ignored, so Chip activates the voice amplifier with a tongue-toggle-switch inside his helmet. Then he yells at the group, “EVERYONE SHUT UP!”

The crowd recoils. Some cover their ears.

Then he points to one of the colonists. “NOW YOU, TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED HERE?”

The colonist points to himself. “You mean me?”

Chip responds impatiently, “YEAH YOU!”

Chip turns his amplifier off as the colonist begins.

He breaks down in tears as he speaks. “We’re sick... We have been begging for help from the mining company for four days, but they’ve ignored us. So we set fires to get attention. We hoped to send a distress signal to others for help. It looks like it worked.”

The listening crowd cheers at the victory.

Chip just grew more confused. The more information he got the less he could figure out what is going on.

Above the colony a saucer-blimp monitors the situation in the crowd. From a distance, saucer-blimps look like inner tubes lying sideways and covered in canvas. These massive white wafers slid gracefully across the sky like manmade clouds. Inside they are filled with lighter-than-air gasses in a ring of gasbags, living spaces, laboratories and offices. The covering of the airships is speckled with windows. Long antennas droop from the circumference and mooring lines sway from the large, open,

round loading dock underneath. These airships brought the comforts of civilization to the untamed alien lands.

Saucer-blimps are floating facilities, often used by companies as mobile offices, market places, or research labs. The airship, currently hovering over the mining colony, is owned by Painwell Pharmacare, but the Arkon Mining Company operates it. It's used primarily for pharmaceutical research. The saucer-blimp is staffed with businessmen, scientists, technicians, and medical personnel. Dr. Glout is one of them.

Currently Dr. Glout stands alone in an air-conditioned meeting room aboard the saucer-blimp. He is a tall man with dark slicked hair wearing a long white lab coat that blends into the clean white room. His thoughts are somber as he gazes through black-rimmed glasses, out the window to the infected crowd below.

He thinks, "I am guilty of murder. I've killed my family, and everyone else in the colony. They just don't know it yet. My weapon was neglect. Eight days ago, I was alerted to the fact that the miners penetrated a large organic mass. They often make unusual discoveries while digging, but never a find like this before. Never anything quite so big.

"It was made very clear to me by the Director of Operations that I was to investigate this phenomena from a distance, but not to raise alarm. And under no circumstances were Eternium Mining operations to be disrupted.

"There was nothing to be alarmed about, not at first. The illness didn't reveal itself immediately. It took three days to incubate. Then the symptoms presented like an allergic reaction, which would subside after a

period of rest. I made this my official position and presented it to my superiors.”

His thoughts are interrupted as the room fills for a scheduled meeting. The attendees, Mr. Tultee, the Skyraco Chief, Dr. Shellout, Dr. Spensor, and Ed take seats around a long white table. Dr. Glout says nothing as he joins them. Mr. Tultee's personal assistant, Ms. Hackenbush, passes out thin booklets. As she rounds the table, she gives her boss a comforting smile then hands him the last document.

Mr. Tultee clears his throat and begins the meeting.

“The situation in Destiny City is much worse than our original assessment. There are only two courses we can take at this point; to cure or to kill. Either path will be blocked by various obstacles. Each will require hard work, on all of our parts.”

Dr. Shellout, a gaunt man with sunken cheeks, cautiously asks, “Helping the victims should be our first priority, right?”

The Mining Rep says, “Oh, it is, but please realize the victims don't start and end here on Claous. No sir. They stretch all the way back to Centrus, to the shareholders, the distributors, sales force, the retailers, not to mention the customers. There are millions of people who will suffer from this accident, if they find out about it.”

Dr. Shellout corrects. “I was referring to the victims of the disease.”

Mr. Tultee redirects. “The greatest challenge we face is containment, both verbally and virally.”

His assistant Ms. Hackenbush sits at his side writing meeting minutes. She nods and reaffirms his words. “Containment, gotta’ have containment.”

Mr. Tultee scans the rest of the crowd. No one else is nodding. Some look tired. Some look shocked. Others are lost in thought. His heavy brow furrows and he pounds his fist on the table and growls. “We will all have to keep our mouths shut. We can’t say or do anything to draw attention. We need to keep our profile low and our costs down. This problem is borderline manageable, at best. It could explode into chaos at any minute. Then there will be a mandatory investigation and we all know what a waste of time and money that is. People are hard to manage when they are panicked. Scared is ok, it's even preferable, but panicked won't do.”

Ed, a young scientist with a crew cut, asks. “What about the spread of this plague?”

Mr. Tultee replies. “The colony wall was intended to keep monsters and aliens out but it will work just as well as a pen. I want to be 100% clear. No contaminated words, or witnesses or substances are to leave this compound. We need to keep our arms around this, while you people do your jobs and work to solve our problem. Do whatever it takes, but stay within the budget guidelines in your handouts.”

Dr. Spensor interjects. “We need to get back into the mine and find a sample of the contaminant.”

Mr. Tultee replied, “Then that will be our next action item. Meeting adjourned.”

Mr. Tultee intercepts the Skyraco Chief as the meeting disperses. “Mr. Chief, is it?”

He responds, "Just 'the Chief' is fine."

Mr. Tultee nods rapidly. "Of course, of course. Let's you and I and Dr. Spensor break off into a smaller meeting to discuss next steps."

Dr. Glout exits the room thinking, "It has become increasingly clear that the contamination, whatever it may be, was not limited to those who suffered direct contact."

He slowly walks alone down a curved, white hallway of the saucer-blimp

"It has spread to all the inhabitants of the colony. I believe it's transmitted through touch, through sweat and the natural oils our skin secretes. It's been nine days since the initial contamination. Now it's too late to stop it. It's terminal. Everyone will die."

He arrives in his office.

"I should have pursued a more aggressive course, I should have established a quarantine. It's an alien world for Zod sake! Who knows what else is lurking out there. I never should have taken this job."

After a quick side-meeting the Chief and Dr. Spensor head to the saucer-blimp radio room. Mr. Tultee enters his private office. Ms. Hackenbush trails behind him.

She closes the door and Mr. Tultee instantly drops the calm veneer he presented during the meeting. He begins pacing as he speaks. "I wanted to

solve this before the Painwell Pharmaceutical bigwig showed up. I'm not sure how they found out about the crisis, but they did. He'll be arriving by fan-cart in a few hours. We need to make sure we all have our stories straight by then."

Ms. Hackenbush nods.

Mr. Tultee digs a palm full of pills from his desk. He gulps them down with water. Then he looks at himself in the mirror and splashes water from an ice bucket in his face. "I'm not looking forward to that meeting either."

He turns to his assistant. "You had better have the Skyraco Chief attend as well."

She asks. "Why would you want a Skyraco in that meeting?"

Mr. Tultee sighs and wipes the excess moisture from his face. "Because people know that when Skyracos show up, things get done. It will make us look pro-active. It will look like we are on top of things."

Alone in a lab office on the saucer-blimp, Dr. Glout stands at a large window and gazes down at the colony below. Through breaks in the smoke he can see Chip and the rest of his Skyraco unit milling about the infected crowd.

The Doctor reflects. "I've made only wrong decisions. The zero operational disruption clause in my contract preserved my own personal allotment of Eternium, which I could never afford on a doctor's meager salary. It seemed like a good deal at the time. It kept my wife young."

He turns to view a desk photo of his wife. "She was so beautiful."

"Now her beauty has been blighted by the pox. It's all my fault. I've failed her as a husband, and as a physician."

He sits down at his desk and begins writing. "My inaction, my abdication of professional responsibility to material comfort and the vanity of youthfulness, has doomed the colony to extinction... and no one who knows the truth, cares. (No one of any authority anyway.)"

"They've tried to convince me that it's not even a crime, but they've imprisoned me here none the less. That's why they won't land this Zod forsaken airship. So I can't escape."

He removes a rope from a storage bin and begins to tie a noose.

"They placed me in an information quarantine to avoid the spread of the truth. Through my work here, I have come to know a great many of the miners and their families, and have come to admire their commitment to their jobs and loved ones, their incredible sense of camaraderie, and their essential love of life, despite their sometimes wretched treatment. They will soon be gone, all of them."

He opens the window

"They brought the disease to me, and I missed it. They sought my help, and I dismissed them. They trusted me in this position. My job was to keep them free from harm, but I failed."

He ties the noose around his neck

“I am guilty. I sentence myself to join them in their fate. It's only fair. I am not above them.”

He jumps from the window. The rope goes taught. He convulses as he swings back and forth under the hovering saucer-blimp then dies. inevitably the lifeless body dangles, high above the smoldering colony.

The last lines of his handwritten note read: “I will take responsibility for my inaction. I abdicate my life. I am sorry I failed you all.”

“To whom it may concern.”

End of Preview

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